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What Really Makes One Stupid?

In many classrooms in South Florida, this situation plays out: A teacher is holding a question and answer discussion. She calls on a student, who replies with the wrong answer. The teacher picks on a second student who quickly answers correctly. "Stupid," someone whispers loud enough for everyone but the teacher to hear. The class then erupts in laughter. The first student then slumps in his seat and shrugs, unaffected. The student who was wrong, is he really stupid or may he just be ignorant? Students and teachers alike confuse these terms mistaking them for synonyms when they are polar opposites when it comes down to the reason why one is stupid or ignorant.

Stupid and ignorant people look the same. They even act the same, yet they are poles apart. www.merriam-webster.com describes the adjective "ignorant" as being, "destitute of knowledge or education." It's related to the word ignore and comes "from French *ignorer*, from Latin *ignorare*, [and] from *ignarus* ignorant." (Dictionary) The same site describes "stupid" as "given to unintelligent decisions or acts." It comes from "Middle French *stupide*, from Latin *stupidus*, [and] from *stupēre* to be numb, be astonished." (Dictionary) These words were once established to describe people who were ill-mannered or were comparatively uneducated. (Dictionary) By focusing on the actual character traits, the site overlooks the deeper concept of the motive behind those character traits. In both instances, a person who is stupid or ignorant is lacking knowledge by definition. Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X were uneducated during a part of their lifetimes. They both had a desire to become educated even if it meant teaching themselves or learning in unfavorable situations. "[W]hen I met with any boy who I knew could

write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, 'I don't believe you. Let me see you try it.' I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that." (Douglass) Douglass made many efforts tracing letters he found and seeking out their names, all under the penalty of death as he was a slave at the time. He later came to learn how to read and write and became an abolitionist. (Douglass) "I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write." (Douglass) X too took great pains to learn how to read and write. "In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks." (X) He copied words from his prison dictionary and read them aloud. He then continued to read after hours by little light in his cell. He also came to know how to read and write. "Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors — usually Ella and Reginald — and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life." X became a black Muslim minister. No one in this time period can call Douglass or X stupid with regard to how much they know at those times. They were ignorant since they were unlettered yet they had a desire to overcome their ignorance.

They also realized that without an education they would be unsuccessful, failures. "[T]he thought of being a *slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart." (Douglass) Douglass realized that the key to escaping slavery was to be literate. X too was disturbed by his ignorance. "I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to say in letters I wrote [...]" (X) Both saw how unbearable it was to remain as they were. The definition of success however is vague and open to interpretation. [Wwww.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) depicts it as "a favorable or desired outcome," and comes from "Latin *successus*, from *succedere*." Conventionally success means becoming famous or acquiring wealth. (Dictionary) Conversely it can also mean reaching a relatively unusual goal such as to set a Guinness world record.

Douglass and X likely defined success as being free since they were both prisoners in a way. Whether it was to be free from the chains that held them or to be free of a mental darkness, the men knew that without learning to read and write they would be forever bonded. Thus, they were moved to learn despite the remoras and become successful by their own definitions, knowledgeable, and no longer ignorant.

Conversely there are cases like Calvin's and Herb Kohl's. Calvin is a little boy that doesn't want to go to school. He is so adamant that he drags his feet to his bus stop and argues with his companion Hobbes. He claims that he is being educated against his will and that his rights are being trampled. (Watterson) Hobbes then asks if he has the "right to remain ignorant." (Watterson) Calvin replies that he refuses to find out. (Watterson) Calvin clearly doesn't want to learn. In the last scene of the comic both figures stand with their backs to the audience effectively shutting out any enlightenment whatsoever. (Watterson) Similarly, there is Herb Kohl. When he was a child, he refused to learn Yiddish.

My mother and her family had everything to do with it. They didn't speak Yiddish at all. Learning Yiddish meant being party to conversations that excluded my mother. I didn't reject my grandparents and their language. It's just that I didn't want to be included in conversations unless my mother was also included. In solidarity with her, I learned how to not-learn Yiddish. (Khol)

Khol took extreme efforts not to learn the language despite how entrenched he was in the language. "If someone told a story in Yiddish, I had to talk to myself quietly in English or hum to myself. If a relative greeted me in Yiddish I responded with the uncomprehending look I had rehearsed for those occasions." (Khol) Both Calvin and Kohl had no desire to learn yet had education at their fingertips thus they can both be called stupid. They also thought that they could be successful without a particular education. Calvin's short-sighted view of success

probably meant being happy and having fun. Being holed up in a school like a prisoner and learning things he didn't like wouldn't play into his plans. He'd much rather go on adventures with Hobbes. Kohl's definition of success certainly included not understanding Yiddish along side his mother. (Kohl) He did this out of his own desire as he wanted to protect his mother from the loneliness of being shut out of conversations in Yiddish. (Kohl) We cannot say whether Calvin got what he wanted or even if he came to be conventionally successful. We can come to know though what happened to Kohl. He did succeed in not learning Yiddish although he has come to regret his childhood decision. "I allowed myself to be content with this partial knowledge, but now I mourn the loss of the language and culture of my father's family that it entailed." (Kohl) Calvin and Kohl are the very opposite of Douglass and X who realized that they could not continue in ignorance and were spurred to face many challenges and learn despite the odds. The difference between the two words lies in the reason why one is uneducated. It is not simply that no education is available; it is the desire that one has to learn. This desire stems from the consequences one expects to face as a result of their decision. An ignorant person will see that he cannot succeed by any means if he is uneducated and is moved to learn so that he can attain the benefits of accomplishment. A person with this kind of motivation succeeds by all definitions. A stupid person will feel as if they can succeed despite the fact that they are uneducated yet, as in the case of Kohl, ultimately fail.

How is it that so often these words are misused? It is likely that these people are stupid or ignorant themselves and are unable to tell the difference between a person who is ignorant or stupid. However, as mentioned before, a stupid person and an ignorant person act and look the same. Even if a person were stupid or ignorant, it would be difficult to conclude whether an uneducated person is stupid or ignorant just by looking at them. Amy Tan demonstrates this in narrating how her mother, a Chinese-American with "limited" English is treated. (Tan) She recognizes that strangers, as well as Tan herself, viewed her mother as someone "damaged

and needed to be fixed.” (Tan) Even her mother saw this, so much so that whenever possible, Tan would speak for her mother.

She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, “This is Mrs. Tan.”

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, “Why he don’t send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money.”

And then I said in perfect English, “Yes I’m getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn’t arrived.” (Tan)

Tan’s mother was intelligent, intelligent enough to play the stock market well, to see what was causing her to be treated differently, and to manipulate situations so that there would be no prejudice against her. It is likely that she didn’t have the opportunity to learn English yet would like to do so. This makes her ignorant, yet people treat her as if she is stupid. “[P]eople in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.” (Tan)

Stupid and ignorant people are treated horribly, often as inferior and incapable of carrying out even the simplest of tasks. They’re treated this way because the unlettered often are too blind to see that they are being mistreated. Even if they realize this, they feel as if injustice is out of their hands since they know too little and are forced to become dependant on others. Once in while, one who is propelled by instinct to resist injustice rises, but is soon pulverized by fear of those who appear to be so much better than them. Those who are intelligent should make an effort to educate the uninstructed as continuing to treat the unlettered this way will allow for the degradation of our culture.

Generally stupid and ignorant describe people who are uneducated to some extent.

People who aren't stupid or ignorant are aware of the fact that the difference between ignorance and stupidity is the reason behind why someone who is untrained is uneducated. The reason does not end simply at that, the reason why someone chooses to remain unlettered lies in the consequences that person expects to face. A stupid person believes he can succeed in choosing to remain stupid. An ignorant person knows that he can only succeed if he overcomes his ignorance. People generally view stupid and ignorant people as one in the same. This misconception allows stupidity to continue to traverse the globe. Never learning the difference between the words allows for prosperity to make the same mistake, thus allowing for the creation of generations more of ignorant and stupid. In addition, ignorant and even stupid people have much to offer. These minds, often untainted by the conformity that tends to result in receiving a formal education, present pertinent yet ridiculously obvious questions that need to be answered. They also have a sort of unadulterated creativity that can be used to decorate the world. By shunning these people out of society, even those who are more intelligent have their minds closed to the diverse ideas that their peers have to offer. Stupid and ignorant people should be treated as people with potential since that is what they are and in doing so a sundry society can exist and flourish.

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